

# Motion Pictures in the Camps, on Transports, Overseas

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Knowing there was no other organization such as the Community Motion Picture Bureau, organized to give SERVICE through motion pictures, we offered our services to the Government without profit during the duration of the war.

On the fifteenth day of May, 1917, we began the work with fifteen training camps and navy yards. Today we are showing over fourteen million feet of selected films to millions of boys in the Young Men's Christian Association huts and auditoriums, in transports going over, and camps, bivouacs and battle fronts "over there." The service is being extended to Italy and the United Kingdom and we are making use of the best productions available from every source. The standards of selection are positive not negative; the aim is joyous, stimulative and educational, instead of propagandist.

## *War, Psychology and the Film*

The boy in the camp has come from normal surroundings into abnormal conditions. Before he was an individual, a man with his own characteristics and personality. He lived his own life within rather loose lines of general policy—he was a law unto him-

self. From this habit of life he came into an environment where he is simply one unit in a vast group, one cog in an ever grinding, relentlessly moving machine. He has little opportunity to exercise initiative. Every move he makes from early morn till night is directed for him by a power that must be obeyed. His first reaction is the inevitable one of withdrawing into himself, of questioning every principle upon which his former life was based and gradually concluding that his individual personality and existence are of almost no account.

Just at this moment the appeal of the motion picture catches him. He is restored to normality. He sees again the familiar things he saw at home. His favorite actors again speak their message of comfort and cheer to him. He realizes that after all he is a normal being, he is the same Bill Jones he was at home. The same demands are made upon his spiritual life as were made before in Newton, Iowa. The first mission of the motion picture therefore is to restore the boy to normality.

## *Recreation an Essential*

The next mission of the motion picture is purely and solely to amuse. The

boy is woefully tired. His mind is tired by the readjustment of his standards; his body by the new physical tasks imposed upon him; his soul by the questionings he has indulged in. The motion picture is the medium through which his body, mind and soul relax, let go that tenseness which is fatal to any normal life, and his spiritual and physical muscles are adjusted into new and receptive lines. He is ready to be amused, to be recreated through the pictures on the screen.

### *Standards*

The indirect function of the picture, but none the less valuable one, is the gradual and general elevation of standards. The boy is shown that he can have comedy, even slapstick without vulgarity; he can have romance without the vampire; he can have love stories with charm and sweetness, without triangle situations; he can have life and joy without the accompaniments of debauchery or vice. The sermon accomplishes its purpose and preaches its truth none the less successfully although not advertised as a sermon or even as an educational or propaganda film. If it is used simply as a picture, as a thriller if you please, it nevertheless puts over its message.

Not an inch of unreviewed subjects is shown in the camps. The pictures are selected as all pictures should be—to fit the need and purpose. We send them slapstick. You do not laugh at slapstick—neither do I, but our boys do, and what can help win the war more than the laughter of our boys? If we can put upon the screen at the embarkation points the fun that will bring even a smile as the boys turn from home shores, we are satisfied. Why do we jump at the conclusion that the slapstick is vulgar? Some is; much isn't. Why do you think the boys want the vulgar? We know

they do not. These are just our boys in camp;—bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh;—clean, patriotic, brave boys, uprooted and torn loose from home by grim war. But they are still our boys and what we have to do is to help them keep their high ideals and not lose themselves in the early days of army discipline. What grander work than to help keep them as they are? The independent American lad who has, alas, known all too little restraint is put under rigorous discipline. He may feel he is but an atom in a great machine; he must feel he is an American man—the winner of the war. When our pictures go into the camps it is their first and chief duty to keep the boy just *our* boy.

After we have selected hundreds of strong, virile pictures for the camp; we have another privilege—we carry the pictures on board the transports and amuse the boys, restive in idleness as they face the great adventure. Over four million feet of film ride the seas every day amusing and cheering the boys going and coming.

Again, we have perhaps an even greater privilege—our pictures are with the boys even to the front line trenches. In hundreds of huts in France we entertain them. Here we select a rather different type of picture than for earlier service, for now the boys want pictures with children, the children for whose safety they fight. They want pictures of home; home life, stories with domestic setting. Home is where their thoughts and hearts are and rest comes to them as they lose themselves in the stories of other homes. Our work is selection; keeping the films moving; keeping the films in perfect condition—a million details face us, even to furnishing the lights for the machines and huts in the shell-devastated front lines.

Can we select the pictures with too much care? Can we be too "nice" in our standards? We have reaction coupons which go to every secretary in charge as the program is announced to them. The secretaries fill in these blanks with care. We are disappointed if the attendance does not far outnumber the capacity and keenly alert if the comment falls below "Good." These reactions are studied each day at headquarters.

The entertainment rations are balanced with as much discrimination as are the soldiers' food rations—to get the greatest possible return for the boys.

#### *Help From the Industry*

Let me here pay tribute to the commercial interests represented in the industry. With only one or two slight and insignificant exceptions the trade has more than met the camp needs. The rentals have been arranged on a cost basis; new prints for France and England have been sold on a laboratory cost basis; no negative cost being figured, and the verdict of the Editorial Department has been respected to the letter.

The Bureau sends Overseas mechanics, chauffeurs, skilled transportation men, as well as editorial, staff and administrative heads, capable of organizing and directing the work of divisions covering large territory and serving millions of troops. The work is effective in keeping up the morale of the troops and interpreting through motion pictures the life and ideals of America to the young men who are so heroically engaged in the titanic struggle to make the world safe for democracy.

#### *The Opportunity*

As you think of the boys in the first weeks of camp life, coming in at the close of a strenuous day of physical exertion, relaxed and lonely—do you

realize what a wonderful opportunity it is to go to them with wholesome entertainment? We who have this privilege feel that we cannot give too much of ourselves, our thoughts, our time, our hearts, to make these entertainments the best possible—constructively good, not just *not bad*. To the Bureau it is nothing short of an opportunity to help win the war. From the President to the errand boy, the thought with us is the same; the spirit of service; the glory of doing our part. No minister in his pulpit feels more earnest, more eager to serve his people than do the hundreds of employees of the Bureau. We do not think—we know we are helping the boys to win the World War.

#### WHAT MOTION PICTURES CAN DO.

The Bureau has been privileged, therefore, to work out on a huge scale an absolute demonstration of what can be accomplished through the medium of motion pictures for a community. For what is a war camp, a transport, or an army battalion overseas, but a community and a community group?

Do you wonder, then, that the Bureau realizes its responsibility? To bring into the life of the American soldier boy normal American life and standards is a job big enough for any group.

We are doing these things; but you have only one duty and that is to see that the pictures in your town just outside the camps and posts are as suitable to the boys' needs as those inside the gates. We had at the Biennial surveys of crimes committed in little towns and all have been traced to the motion pictures. The saloon, the crap game, lurid novels, have all been forgotten and a cry has gone up for censorship of the film. I would cry with you if censorship would make the world safe for our youth. I would work for you to censor the screen, the stage, the library, the pulpit, but not

so do we meet the battles of the world. We fit our supply to our needs; we select the suitable. We have ready made to our hand the motion picture, the most wonderful invention since printing and I make no apology for the triteness of the remark. We must use it wisely.

#### *Censorship*

When anyone says that ninety-eight per cent of motion pictures are bad, he does not know whereof he speaks. There are miles on miles of strong, worth-while pictures always ready for the seeing. Believe me when I make this statement, for we view it all. We must know all the output, for the best of everything is none too good for our boys.

While you lay everything evil in your little town to the unwise use of pictures and plead for censorship; while you listened at the G. F. W. C. Convention to the eloquent representative for the censor board of Pennsylvania, did you remember that Philadelphia is the one city which proved so unfit for adults that Federal authority took it in hand? Cutting out the pictures of a few bathers will not make a clean city; eliminating unde artists' models will not do away with a red light district. Choosing and patronizing the good will prevent the production of the evil. Select the good; the bad will die of starvation. I know of no other public utility that has been so mistreated as the motion pictures. I know of nothing that has been so misunderstood. The possibilities of the screen have not yet been realized by producer, distributor, exhibitor, or consumer. Do you know anything else that was ever supplied to everyone without discrimination? Do you let your children read all the books upon your shelves? Of course, you will say No. Does your "No" mean you let them read *none* of the

books on your shelves? Would you cut up your Shakespeare to fit it to your child, or will you wait until your child is old enough and then give him Shakespeare as he is?

WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY IS IT?

Why have we sent our children to any picture house without choice or discrimination, wondering possibly if the air is good? Do you send your child to every play of the spoken drama? Is it because at one place you pay two dollars, but at the other one ten cents? Must all screen dramas be suitable for the young because the price is within their reach?

When I left home at sixteen I was told never to read books by certain writers then busy contaminating the adolescent mind. That same careful mother would have told me never to see pictures of certain types had they been there then as now. Why not select our moving pictures as we select our books, our friends, our clothes, our homes, to fit our needs? A few hours ago I heard a woman in the lobby of a Hot Springs hotel say, "Well, I am for state censorship until I can get Federal. I saw the awfulest picture the other day and it is a disgrace to have such pictures shown," and she named a certain rather recent release. We have censorship in four states and not one inch has ever been cut from the picture which so offended the good woman. I have no hesitation in saying that that same picture has been cordially received by Young Men's Christian Association Secretaries in every state in the country and has given pleasure to hundreds of thousands of boys in the camps.

The percentage of evil films is too large because it exists at all, but you can eradicate the evil. It is up to you to do so, but you will never do it by the censorship method. Most of you saw in Hot Springs the cuttings

exhibited by a representative of one of the censorship boards. Can you think without indignation of the showing of the bare nursing mother's breast cut from a film made to teach ignorant mothers how to keep the baby's mouth healthy, by a clean nipple? That bare breast was shown with unclothed dancers and studio models and condemned with only a word—"Might be all right if shown always in the right time and place." Could it ever be shown in worse company?

Can you delegate your responsibility? My answer is No. Selection is the only sane method of handling any commodity and the bad need never be selected in your community if you create the demand for the good—and the supply of the good is constantly increasing.

#### *Quality, Not Age, the Test*

How can you help? One way is to take motion pictures seriously—study them carefully. The motion picture is an art; do not consider it on the basis of spatter work and putty vases. It is not an imitation; it is a great art appealing more directly to the brain than any art. If you go you will patronize the good; if you choose to go to the good you will do a real service in killing the bad. If your club or you ask first, "is it *new*?" and second "is it good?" you are not serving. The topical weeklies must be new to interest; the features must be good to interest. If the old is allowed to live and it is not necessary for the producer to *bring out* something new each week to hold a place and make

a living, the result will be what you want and what will serve the community.

The Bureau ever since its entrance into the field five years ago has had one decided purpose, to create a standard screen equal to standard literature. The producer will be encouraged beyond all present conception when the people learn to view motion pictures with the discrimination they give to the spoken drama. The increasing use of "re-issues" is a most encouraging sign for it indicates the decided movement toward better films. Many *really* excellent subjects years old are playing now this minute on Broadway to crowded houses.

The motion picture will soon teach your children to read; it will make Tokyo and Juneau as real to them as the school-house playground. You and I knew such places, only as red circles in a field of green or yellow. Americanization of the alien will be accomplished in rapid manner on the screen in the open schoolhouse. Old and young will play together and relax in the community theater; in a thousand ways the life of the community will be enriched—you can hasten it all if you will.

In closing, one word again of your relation to the work: Please co-workers, make sure that the most careful selection governs the screens for which you are responsible. Do not vote for censorship, delegating, as you may think, your responsibility by a vote, and then sitting back in fancied safety. It can't be done that way, *it can't*.

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